

Sulu Speaks : George Takei on “Star Trek”

By John C. Tibbetts

TIBBETTS INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW:

The second film in the “Star Trek” series, *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, is now playing to packed theaters across the nation. The first film, guided by Gene Roddenberry and Robert Wise, was a thoughtful excursion into some of the philosophical implications of the original television series. The second film, according to George Takei, is “high adventure” all the way. Shooting began on Stage 9 at Paramount on November 9, 1981; principal photography concluded on January 29, 1982. It was directed by Nicholas (*Time After Time*) Meyer, scripted by Jack B. Sowards from a story by Harve Bennett and Jack Sowards, and produced by Harve Bennett and Robert Sallin.

Needless to say, Mr. George Takei is delighted at the continuing success story of the “Star Trek” franchise.. George is a multitalented performer who, long before he donned the uniform and persona of “Sulu,” had demonstrated a flair for the theatre. His first professional job in film entertainment was as a voice dubber for the classic Japanese science fiction film, *Rodan* (1957). He appeared before the movie cameras for the first time while a student at UCLA. The film was *Ice Palace* (1960) with Richard Burton, Robert Ryan and Carolyn Jones. He also debuted on television for an episode of *Playhouse 90* at this, same time. Then came many guest shots on other television series, including *Hawaiian Eye*, *Maverick*, *77 Sunset Strip*, and *Adventures in Paradise*. The role of “Sulu,” the helmsman for the *U. S. S. Enterprise*, in Gene Roddenberry's television series *Star Trek* occupied George from 1966-69 (a total of seventy-nine episodes).

George stays very active these days. He is involved in politics and has attended Democratic Presidential Conventions since 1972. (He was invited to attend the Inaugural festivities of Jimmy Carter in 1976). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Southern California Rapid Transit District. He is also Vice President of the American Public Transit Association. In addition, he heads up the Fine Arts Committee of Los Angeles and currently is assisting in Mayor Bradley's gubernatorial campaign.

When I caught up with George Takei in his Los Angeles home, he had just returned from a twilight jog. Very quickly, I realized that George is one of my favorite people. A man of diverse cultural interests, he can talk about politics, art, and French theatre with equal facility. His home is a model of taste and eclectic interests. Yet he is essentially an informal person whose accessibility and ease of manner are wholly disarming. He has taken the whole Star Trek phenomenon in stride, so to speak. He readily concedes its importance to his own career, yet he is not intimidated by it in the least.

Throughout our conversation, I was struck by his animated, engaging manner, his candor, and (of course) his amazing, richly modulated voice. . . . More's the pity that his distinctive laugh cannot possibly be rendered in print!

This interview transpired a month before the release in June 1982 of *The Wrath of Khan*.

THE FAN MOVEMENT

ACS: The loyalty of the Star Trek fan is legendary. Do you attend many Trek conventions? What are they like?

TAKEI: It's really an incredible phenomenon, this thing called Star Trek conventions. They show the television episodes continuously during a weekend. Go anywhere in the hotels at 3:30 in the morning and there are bodies lying all around, watching the shows...

ACS: Have you ever found it embarrassing that some of the fans might know more about Star Trek than you do?

TAKEI: No. From the beginning I've prefaced my talks by saying, I just work there! The real experts are the people seated out there. They are the ones who are going to tell me what we did. That gets me off the hook right away.

ACS: Tell me about the positive and negative aspects that you see in this whole fan thing.

TAKEI: Well, for some, the show helps them fill out their lives; for others, there's this wonderful social aspect to the conventions. You meet people who are activists and doers. Then there are others who just try to give you their room keys.

ACS: Star Trek groupies? Am I hearing this correctly?

TAKEI: Believe it or not.

ACS: Well, how brazen does this sort of thing get?

TAKEI: Well, that's pretty obvious when they give you a key with a little note attached to it!

ACS: The hazards of stardom?

TAKEI: You want to be a gentleman, so you just say that the convention organizers have packed a full schedule for me and. . . well, I'd love to. . . but. . .

ACS: I understand.

TAKEI: You know, my book, *Mirror Friend, Mirror Foe*, found its genesis in a convention party. This was a convention in Toronto, Ontario. We were sitting around and I started talking about Ninjas, a sub-samurai group in Japanese history. They were hired for sabotage, for espionage, for assassination—the kind of thing that a noble samurai would not take on. From this conversation came the idea for a collaboration on a science fiction novel. That's what I enjoy about these conventions. It's an opportunity to really (call it serendipity) meet some people that you would not have met otherwise. And I think what Star Trek is all about is to encourage people to take an active role in shaping not only your own life but the course of human events, if you will.

IN THE JAPANESE RELOCATION CAMPS

ACS: Let's talk about early memories. As a child of Japanese descent, were you involved with the Japanese “relocations” at the outbreak of World War II?

TAKEI: Yes. I was a little baby only about a year old. I did spend my boyhood in those camps. I was born here in Los Angeles and the relocation as they called it, happened almost immediately. We were initially put in a camp created temporarily at the race track at Santa Anita. From there we were taken to a camp in the swamps of rural Arkansas. It was there that my mother did a bold and extraordinary thing: she renounced her citizenship. My uncle, on the other hand volunteered to fight in the United States Army. There we were, rifles pointing at us, behind barbed wire, not knowing if we were going to be there for the next three months or for the rest of our lives. . . . I do remember the tension and anxiety every time we had to move in those years: the women crying, waking up in the middle of the night, my parents talking under a tiny little light in the corner. I guess that was when she was discussing renouncing her citizenship. My father tried to talk her out of that, but he always said she was a willful! woman. Anyway, she had to be put in what they called a “hard-core” camp which was in northern California, which meant that the family would have to be separated. My father didn't want that to happen so he volunteered to go with her to the hard-core camp, and of course the children went there too. It wasn't until I was much older that I appreciated the anguish they were going through. Now that I have thought of it, I think my mother's reaction was a very American reaction to a very *unAmerican* act on the part of our government.

ACS: Doubtless you're aware of the recent hearings regarding the relocation camps.

TAKEI: Yes, and I have testified. In a large sense, it was the ideals of this country that were most damaged, and unless we learn that lesson from that experience then we might repeat that again and that's why we've got to remember our history with all of its glory as well as its blemishes. I maintain that our system is strong enough and resilient enough and our ideals are noble enough that we can do that. Once we start censoring it or segregating parts that we like and parts of our history that we don't like, we are going to be in real danger.

SULU SPEAKS

ACS: Let's jump forward in time to your first acting experiences...

TAKEI: That really started when I did some dubbing for *Rodan*, the famous Japanese horror movie. That was rough work. I was about sixteen. Not only did we do dialogue but also crowd noises. Take after take and you are going URGHHH and AHHHH and so forth. You come home absolutely raw, throat just torn to shreds. But I enjoyed it; I was acting and I was getting paid for it. I said to my father, who wanted me to be an architect, “I'm going to have to do something about this. I don't want ten years down the road after I'm done with architecture and ensconced in some architect's office to be thinking I should have gone on with acting.” So I ended up at UCLA studying the theatre where I was seen by a Warner Brothers casting director named Hoyt Bowers (who is now at Paramount). Through that contact I got a part in Edna Ferber's *Ice Palace*.

ACS: When did Star Trek come onto the scene?

TAKEI: That was after I had gotten my Master's Degree at UCLA and had done a whole slew of Warner Bros. television series. The television work was very valuable for me. I learned very early

on that if you act as you do for the stage, particularly at Royce Hall at UCLA, when you are projecting out, that you will be the hammiest thing around in front of a camera. So you learn very quickly to restrain yourself. Also, acting for the camera is very technical. You have to know where the key lights are. You can be doing beautiful things, but if you are not in the light, or if you are not on your mark then it's all lost.

ACS: Did your Japanese ancestry have anything to do with your Sulu role?

TAKEI: Gene Roddenberry very consciously wanted a pluralistic look for the "Spaceship Earth" concept. You know this was in the mid to latter 1960's, when the civil rights issue was tearing the country apart. But somehow on television it wasn't being reflected at all. *Star Trek*, I think, was one of the few shows that dealt with a pluralistic society. But Sulu was never boringly chauvinistic about his ethnicity. Initially, the idea was for a black actor to play the part; and it wasn't until Gene interviewed me that he said, "Why not?" And then after I started the role, we discovered there is a "Sulu Sea" east of the Philippines! Serendipity. I spoke without an accent. You'll notice when I go into the swordsmanship thing (in the television episode, "Naked Time") I don't use a Japanese samurai sword but a French fencing foil. Sulu's really a man of the world and his interests span all cultures, whereas Chekov was Russian and chauvinistically Russian and a little unbelievable within the context of the 23rd century... You know, there were two pilots made of *Star Trek*. The first one didn't quite sell so a second one had to be made. One of the reasons for the failure of the first was the fact that the second in command was not Mr. Spock. Mr. Spock was a much more subordinate character. There was a female character named Number One played by Majel Barrett (who eventually wound up playing Nurse Chapel). The consensus was that having a woman as second in command was unbelievable and that we couldn't have that. However, we *did* end up with a pointy-eared Vulcan, so it was liberal and progressive in that respect!

ACS: Are there some television episodes you are especially fond of?

TAKEI: Well, "The Naked Time" gave me a chance to do a little bit more than just press buttons. I got to run around with a fencing foil and look a little crazed. In fact, every one of the scenes where I get something to do, I am frenzied or crazed or zapped out. Same thing with "Mirror, Mirror," where we all played the reverse of our characters. Sulu is a wonderful, lovable person as we know him on the series; but in "Mirror, Mirror" we see the reverse of that—the cut-throat, vicious, murderous kind of character.

ACS: Spock is killed in the new film. So what happens next? Is he *really* gone?

TAKEI: In Science fiction anything can happen. Watch the ending very carefully. Watch it. One of the plot elements is the creation of a "genesis factor," or energy burst that creates life. The missile-torpedo bearing Spock's dead body goes to off in the direction of the genesis cloud.

ACS: Let's talk about both films together. Same uniforms?

TAKEI: No, different uniforms. In the first film we had a unisex kind of uniform. I didn't like that. I think there is a difference between men and women and there should be an appreciation and acknowledgement of that fact. To dress men and women alike I think is crazy. Anyway, that's

corrected in the second film.

ACS: What about things like plot, pacing, and action?

TAKEI: The new film has got plenty of pace, rhythm, genuine conflict and high adventure. Do you recall the episode on television, "Space Seed," with Ricardo Montalban? He was abandoned on this planet with some barbarian types and he comes back and takes over another ship in Star Fleet and that's where the battles come in. Montalban is a wonderful adversary. The problem with the first film was there was no real pitting of forces. *V'ger* was too awesome, too all-powerful. If there had been any conflict, the *Enterprise* would have been wiped out, just like that. As for the sets, things haven't changed appreciably. However in the first film, many of the buttons were practical—you could punch a button and something really would light up or things would start moving; whereas on the new film that wasn't so. And my gearshift has been eliminated! Do you remember the gearshift I had? Here, I just press a button.

ACS: The word is out you do your own stunts here.

TAKEI: Well, the *Reliant* is shooting at us and we take one big major hit and there's a lot of stuff flying around. The camera is right on my face and when I take the hit, the explosion is right there. There's a little spring mechanism under me and I bounce off that and fly into a pile of mattresses off to the side. It's no big deal...

ACS: What kind of participation did Gene Roddenberry have on the new film?

TAKEI: Well, Gene had had some difficulties on the first film. We had enormous cost overruns and with each one Gene lost more authority until the cost had gone so far beyond the initial budget that Gene for all rights and purposes was powerless. The real power had reverted to the money source, the front office.. In the new film, *The Wrath of Khan*, Gene is on board as a consultant, but a consultant with no veto power.

ACS: Which means...?

TAKEI: Which means that he can write memos, make recommendations, give advice, and they can thank him and merrily go ahead and do what they were already doing. So it's been a very frustrating situation for Gene in both films, but most particularly with the most recent one. I would think to a creative person like Gene, to a man who has so many ideas, to a man who really is the greatest authority on Star Trek, it can be very frustrating to not be able to make a meaningful contribution to it.

ACS: Anything in the new film that the buffs might especially pick up on?

TAKEI: There's an inconsistency in it they might notice. Chekov was a character that was not introduced to the television show until the second season. Yet, the story that was the basis for the film came from an episode from the *first* season when Chekov was not around. But when Chekov sees Khan (Ricardo Montalban) he recognizes him in the film, which is not really possible! See what I mean...?

ACS: Yes, but about this source material, "Space Seed." . . . Is the new film a rehash of that story or what?

TAKEI: No, it's just a continuation of the story. We pick up on the Montalban character ten years later.

ACS: The film seems to have gone through a number of different titles. What's the latest?

TAKEI: At this time it's called *Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country*. It's a Shakespearean reference from *Hamlet*: "...the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns/ puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of."

ACS: Incidentally, some of my friends who are Trek buffs want to know if Khan is real or an android?

TAKEI: He's real! Yes, that android thing comes from *Time* magazine. They had a shot of Ricardo Montalban and three female barbarians with him. Oh, Montalban is fantastic. He's in his sixties; I think he is about sixty-four or sixty-five. He is in incredible shape. In *Fantasy Island* he's always wearing that white suit; but here, he's bare-cheated through a good portion of the action. The muscles are so tight they could have been drawn on.

ACS: I'm beginning to get the impression that you prefer the second film to the first...

TAKEI: No, actually, I enjoyed the first film very much, although the critics didn't seem to receive it very well. Some of the sexual implications of it were very interesting. Man's relationship with technology seemed to have a lot of this sexual thing. First, there's Kirk's relationship with the *Enterprise*. When he first sees it after all those years, we hear a love song as he circles around this voluptuous mistress of his. He may have had many human female mistresses but his real mistress is the *Enterprise*. The, *V'ger* is personified by Ilia who is really herself a product of technology. She in turn has a relationship going with a human, Decker. Also, there is the *Enterprise's* "relationship" with *V'ger* itself: Interesting. I think the sexual metaphor there is very, very prominent . . . Remember the climax that's reached when the male and female representatives merge and there is a subsequent "birth" of another lifeform?

ACS: How much input do you have generally about what your own character of Sulu does or says?

TAKEI: Oh, I always have a lot to say about my character. Robert Wise was very receptive on the first film. On the new one, I wrote lots of memos to Harve Bennett. But the result was only one additional scene that gave Sulu something to do. It's a scene in the shuttlecraft (it's the *only* scene in the shuttlecraft). Watch for it. Kirk congratulates me on my new command assignment. But in my memo it was much better!

WITH JOHN WAYNE

ACS: George, I didn't know about a new assignment for Sulu, and we'll get back to that. But first, I want to know a little about your work with John Wayne on *The Green Berets*. Was it intimidating for you or just "all in a day's work"?

TAKEI: Wayne was always very much "John Wayne" all the time, even off screen. Not only did he direct the film but he wrote it as well. The script that we had was thrown out and he was improvising as we went along. He had a very "John Wayne" way of directing, too. If I went to the wrong place on the set, he'd say, "No, George, not over there," and he would grab me by the cuff and lift me up and place me in the right position! And he would make up the dialogue; which is why we all spoke like John Wayne throughout the picture!

ACS: In a military sense, you portrayed his Vietnamese counterpart.

TAKEI: That's right. I was, as he said, a good Vietnamese.

BACK TO THE BRIDGE OF THE ENTERPRISE

ACS: But back to Star Trek, as I see our time is running out. You mentioned something about Sulu getting a new assignment...?

TAKEI: In the new film Sulu is back with the *Enterprise* for one last final service. There is a brief discussion where Kirk congratulates me on getting my own ship. I'm going on to command my own ship. But I'm back on the *Enterprise* for just this one more go round.

ACS: The helmsman becomes the captain of his own ship eventually.

TAKEI: Right. But maybe I'll come back to the *Enterprise* someday. Maybe as the adversary and start some shooting. . . !